

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

*You got blood on yo' face
You big disgrace
Wavin' your banner all over the place
We will we will rock you.*

*(lyrics from the song
'We Will Rock you' by Queen)*

Kolkata was important in 1969 for the first Rajdhani Express in the country, to speed to the metropolis on 1 March from New Delhi. The second United Front government of leftists and turncoat Congressmen was then in power. Foundation stone of the first underground railway in the country was laid on 29 December 1972 in this city by Indira Gandhi. The full 16.5 km underground stretch became operational in 1995 and even after 23 years since the laying of the foundation stone, it was the only of its kind in the country. In today's scam ridden milieu, this city's claim to fame was the first major post independence financial scam which had its roots in this city. Haridas Mundhra, a city trader duped Life Insurance Corporation of India to invest in the equity of a few bankrupt companies that he managed. The scam led to the resignation of T T Krishnamachari, the then finance minister, in 1958.

Calcutta and Bengal has been on a slow gear since then and in 1985, Rajiv Gandhi ended up calling Kolkata a dying city. However, dying or otherwise, Calcutta and Bengal have been continuously exporting manpower of both the skilled and unskilled variety all across the country. Be it sweatshops in Kalbadevi that require finesse to turn gold into ornaments, software hubs in Bangalore and Hyderabad, construction industry in Kerala or dance bars in Mumbai and its suburbs, workforce from Bengal is ubiquitous. Epicenters for mega scams have shifted to Delhi, Bombay, Chennai but Kolkata has continued to be a strong supply base. Whenever a major scam unfolds one finds sleuths landing in the city to raid local addresses. In the recent Rs 50,000 crore Hasan Ali Khan tax default scam, enforcement directorate men questioned one Kashinath Tapuriah. It may be a co-incidence that Kashinath is the son-in-law of pioneer scamster Haridas Mundhra.

A very Kolkata like scam, subtle, elegant and arty broke on the morning of 2 March. A local daily reported that an exhibition, 'A Show of Rabindranth's Tagore's paintings' presented by Government College of Art and Craft was displaying fakes. The show had been inaugurated by the Governor of West Bengal. An art aficionado blew the whistle and the cue was taken up by other experts in the city and elsewhere. Most of the paintings, save three, were sourced from a collector from Dhanbad who claimed that he received them from Rani Mahalanobis. . The principal of Government Art College, a political appointee, wailed her 'shock, disappointment and disgust' at the accusation. She was dismissive but subsequent events overwhelmed her.

The storm in the next morning's tea cup was fanned by Victor Banerjee, the actor, politician & traveller, who boasted his exploit of once ripping a fake Hemen Mazumdar canvas with his weather beaten Victorinox Swiss army knife. A dealer in fakes, who had come to Victor to vend the fake, reportedly scurried a retreat while Victor & Victorinox stood victorious. The government could only react on 7 March, a full five days after the scam was detected and after 7 days of hosting the scam in the premises of a government educational institution. The education minister in an act resembling somnambulism commented 'I will look into the matter on Tuesday'. He had reasons to sleep-walk. The disbursement of February salary of government aided college teachers had to wait almost till the end of the first Sabbath of March. WBCUTA, the organization of these teachers is a pocket borough of

the education minister as well as the ruling left front and with elections staring at them during their waking and sleeping hours; the minister had reasons to sleepwalk.

A PIL was affirmed before the High Court on 8 March. The plea was for the court to act since the government and college authorities were playing the fiddle while the farce was being publicly enacted. On 11 March, a division bench directed the officer-in-charge of the college to meet the director of the Indian museum. The formalities were duly completed on the afternoon of 14 March. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the media went happily hunting for the next scoop.

However, many jagged edges of the fake painting scam were smoothed over. A city daily reported that Vadodara based Tagore scholar Ratan Parimoo had recounted the strange case of a lady art teacher from Kolkata who taught her students to fake Tagore. The same daily claimed that academically trained artists of Kolkata are good at draughtmanship and this skill serves them in good stead in churning out fakes by local masters. The story was not pursued because it is easier to make devils of out of work artists rather than pursue fellow genteel folk who groom such Oliver Twists into the wrong trade.

Like politics, the market for works of art is tainted to the core. It is a cash market and cheque transactions that leave a trail through banks are extremely rare. The prices are sky high and yet works of art are rarely sold with any warranty. There is a process of authentication of works of art but it is susceptible to an occasional failure since it is entirely based on skills and training of individuals. So if one is at the wrong end of the transaction, a sucker, s/he is left holding the baby for all time to come. Big art buyers in the city and owners of art galleries are mostly scions of erstwhile jute barons and other trading families. To them work of art is just another commodity to be purchased cheap and sold dear. Like the jute industry that employs 2 lac impoverished workers and is still run by rich barons, wannabe artists are another source of profits for these moneybags.

Behind the limelight, glitz and glamour of mannequins and successful artists who smile to the click of cameras and to the glare of flashguns lies a twilight zone. A sordid world of failed artists, fake makers & dealers, scamsters, moneybags, galleries and cash transactions; buying and selling of art objects has become an integral ancillary to money laundering activities. The Dhanbad antecedents of the collector of fakes in the reported scam should serve as an eye opener. Dhanbad is not only famous for its coal mines but also well known for its mining mafia. Although, as of now, no firm trail has been established one is reminded of a well-known educationist & researcher who once, on seeing a frog near his feet, jumped from his chair in alarm. His argument was that if there is a frog nearby then a snake cannot be too far behind. □□□